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ABSTRACT

Authentic video documents produced for an audience of native speakers can provide a valuable complement to traditional teaching materials. Foreign language teachers will find the task of choosing materials both enriching and less demanding by working in teams. Practical ways the teacher can use "off-air" materials more effectively are suggested, including information about how to select excerpts, operate playback equipment, and create lesson units. Two specific uses of off-air video are given as examples: a one-hour class based on a commercial and a week-long unit using an eight-minute excerpt from a French-Canadian documentary. (Author/MSE)

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USING "OFF-AIR" TELEVISION BROADCASTS FROM NON-U.S. SOURCES--SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Louis A. Olivier[1]

Authentic video documents produced for an audience of native speakers can provide a valuable complement to traditional, "packaged", teaching materials. Although the use of such documents requires careful selection and a substantial amount of preparation, foreign language teachers will find the task both enriching and less demanding by working in teams. The article suggests practical ways the teacher can more effectively use "off-air" materials, including information about how to select excerpts, the operation of play-back equipment, and the creation of lesson units. Two specific uses of off-air video are outlined: a one-hour class based on a commercial spot, and a week-long unit which uses an eight-minute excerpt from a French-Canadian documentary.

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Next to travel abroad, television seems to offer the most complete access to the sights and sounds of a foreign culture. And when the video document has been produced by, for, and about those who are native to that culture, it has the additional quality of reflecting, a priori, something of its originators'--and presumably its intended consumers'--psyche, as well.

It hardly seems necessary to detail the potential uses of such a resource in the foreign language classroom. Nor is it my intention to argue the pros and cons of off-air video materials in great detail. There seem to me to be two or three major items on each side of the debate, if indeed there is a debate. As for the "pros", the most compelling arguments are, without doubt, *authenticity* and *variety*. Packaged audio tapes loaned or sold with textbooks have their uses, but the most banal conversation overheard on a Paris subway is more interesting. Packaged video programs like "Zarabanda", or "Guten Tag" (both filmed on location with native speakers) are excellent, but once you have bought them you have a finite resource. However authentic the speech and the locales shown you are, after all, watching a product made for an audience of non-native speakers. (The soap opera in "Zarabanda" is great fun, and American students respond very well to it, but I wouldn't want to see its ratings if it were run opposite "Dallas" in Madrid or Barcelona.)

However, off-air materials should not be seen as competing with either audio or video packages: their special value is as a complement to other electronic--and non-electronic--teaching resources. As a complement they have the weaknesses of their virtues, i.e. by their very authenticity, the fact that they have been produced for native speakers, they will seem to the first-time user to be far too difficult. Difficult not only for the student to understand, but for the teacher to adapt.

This has been one of the chief criticisms from those who are "in the trenches". It is a criticism which can't be dismissed lightly, even by enthusiasts like myself. There is no question that until we have done a lot more sharing of ideas and of materials through journals like this one and through professional conferences and workshops some teachers will probably continue to feel that adapting authentic materials for the beginning and intermediate classroom

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takes an inordinate amount of time and effort. (Many people felt something like that about learning to use a word processor--until they started using one.).

The fact remains, however, that using off-air materials is a more complex problem than "using" a textbook, or a packaged video course, for some obvious reasons. Although textbook selection can be confusing and exasperating, the selection once made turns out to be a whole world of selections: by choosing a book you choose a method, a lexicon, an approach to cultural material, a set of priorities as to grammar principles, a collection of visual aids, a voice or voices on the audio tapes, and even a set of personalities the students and you will have to live with for quite some time (those on whose conversations you will be eavesdropping). If you are happy with all, or even with most, of those selections made by the textbook writers you are fortunate, and they have saved you a lot of work, work which users of off-air video materials will have to do for themselves.

And as if that were not enough, the users of off-air video don't even have a set of catalogues to guide them. This is the other complaint from people in the trenches: where do we get access to this stuff?

In point of fact, not too long ago the problem of access was so great that we did not have the luxury of discussing method much. In 1973 when I was first introduced to the use of video in the classroom by François Marchessou, professor of English and director of the Audio-Visual Office of the University of Poitiers (France), we were unable to act on our plans to exchange materials because the cost of multistandard television equipment was prohibitive, as was the cost of having video tapes re-recorded (transcoded) so that they could be played on single-standard machines. [NOTE: The world is divided into several (competing) television broadcast standards or signals. For technical reasons a program which is taped with one kind of signal cannot be played or copied on equipment manufactured for a different signal. The three most common systems are NTSC (U.S., Canada, Mexico, Japan, among others), PAL (West Germany, Scandinavia, and most of western Europe), and SECAM (France, Eastern Europe, much of Africa, etc.).]

The situation is considerably simpler now, and various solutions are available. It is possible, for instance, to receive broadcasts in an increasing number of foreign languages directly through a satellite receiving dish. Some schools have been able to get federal funding assistance to purchase a dish commercially (Lincoln Community High School in Illinois, for one). Another Illinois school (Hall Township High School in Spring Valley) made a science project of building their own dish and received considerable national attention for their initiative. The cost of buying a dish has gone down steadily in recent years. One high school principal told me that the dish had cost about the same amount as the cheerleaders' uniform budget for a five-year period. The chain-link fence around the Hall Township dish cost more than the equipment behind it.

Video cassette recorders and monitors with adapters for the various international television standards are now well within the range of what some people have paid for single-standard (NTSC) equipment. A complete unit may now sell for as little as $1,500, and there have been ads in professional publications for single-standard VCRs adapted for multistandard use for even less money. With such equipment it is possible to play video tapes purchased abroad, or to exchange materials with colleagues in other countries. Offers of such exchanges have begun to appear in professional publications and will surely increase in number. (Keep in mind, of course, that copied materials may be subject to restricted use according to copyright laws.)

As the use of video increases we are sure to see large organizations like FACSEA (for French) and official cultural agencies, as well as commercial suppliers, increase the number and improve the variety of their offerings. Video catalogues will soon be almost as common as textbook catalogues. And, of course, there will be more independents who will produce invaluable and low-cost cultural material modeled on Bernard Petit's "Laurence Wylie in Peyranne-1983" (AATF National Bulletin, vol. 10, no. 4, April 1985, p. 17).

In short, the argument from scarcity can soon be dismissed as a valid reason not to incorporate off-air video in the foreign language classroom. Which brings us back to the matter at hand: using, not getting.

EQUIPMENT

Technical data on video playback equipment, satellite dishes, and related hardware can be obtained from media resource centers, university and commercial television stations, local retailers, trade magazines, and so on. Assuming that the reader has access to foreign video materials in tape form I will concentrate here on the equipment the classroom teacher will have to manipulate.

You will need, of course, a video cassette recorder (VCR) and a monitor. The VCR should be equipped with a *pause* or *freeze-frame* feature. Some of the older VCRs may not have this feature; you will miss it. Some machines have a counter on the instrument panel, while others have a counter which can be projected over the image on the screen when you want it. This is a great help both in preparation and during classroom use. You should also do your best to get a VCR which comes with a hand-held remote-control device, preferably wireless. This "remote" should have controls for fast forward and reverse as well as a pause button. If you are obliged to work without a remote be sure to place the VCR at waist level on a desk or table alongside the monitor. I have seen teachers groping for switches on a VCR placed under a monitor on a wheeled cart: awkward, not very dignified, and it's not even aerobic. Be careful lifting the VCR (you may want your media services person to do it for you), but don't be afraid to move it into a position of optimum convenience for you.

Video equipment can hardly be called user-friendly. Strictly speaking it is *user-indifferent* but some teachers take its indifference for hostility. Students in my methods course on occasion have actually walked around the table to operate controls because they unconsciously felt too intimidated to turn the VCR so that the controls faced the side on which they were standing. Don't try to use video in the classroom until you are thoroughly familiar with the controls. You should not have to stop and look at the buttons or switches. If you can drive a car with automatic transmission or can type you can learn to use the VCR controls or remote by touch alone. The ideal technique, which will have the effect of making the image primordial and the equipment virtually invisible, is to be sure the talking never stops while the controls are being operated.

CHOOSING MATERIAL

1. *Never work alone* if you have a choice. One of the unexpected side effects of selecting material is professional enrichment for the instructor. When they began working on video materials at the University of Poitiers, faculty members who were native speakers were astonished at how much they learned themselves and at how much there was to notice--too much for any one person. Two (or better yet, three) colleagues viewing the same broadcast will notice different things: one will remark recurrence of a grammatical structure, another vocabulary items, the third gesture or cultural content. If you think of it as a team project you might even want to divide the labor along such lines as these. If you are on your own you may devise a work sheet with columns entitled "grammar", "vocabulary", and "culture". By using the on-screen counter you can easily jot down a number in the appropriate column and later go back through the tape concentrating on one category or the other.

2. Don't be too ambitious: choose relatively short excerpts. The best results seem to come from intensive use of segments rather than the relatively passive viewing of whole programs. You can teach for an hour or more on the basis of a one-minute commercial. You can easily teach four or five class periods using one five- to eight-minute segment.

3. Don't be afraid of loose ends in content material. It doesn't matter that you have taken one scene from a teleplay, or one piece of a news report. If in the end students insist on seeing the rest, make it an out-of-class

assignment to be done after they have thoroughly mastered the excerpt. Programs you would never want to show in their entirety can yield surprising material: one of my methods students gave a lesson unit drawn from a French teleplay which I had decided was hopelessly maudlin and preachy. In the middle of this dull morality play the protagonist, suddenly promoted to a better-paying job, decides to use his raise money to buy a car after seeing his daughter's macho boyfriend drive off with squealing tires. The father is seen taking a driving lesson, choosing the car, driving it home with more pride than skill, and announcing his achievement to wife and daughter. Viewed in isolation this brief segment--perhaps five minutes long--stands alone quite well: it is funny, it is believable, it is culturally authentic, and it provides a range of vocabulary and expression which is both wide and idiomatic.

4. Don't worry about grammatical or lexical loose ends, either. There is no need to cover every conceivable aspect of even the briefest excerpt. Of course you can easily transcribe the entire script of a 30-second, or a one-minute commercial and you may wish to do so, but you can skim or entirely omit words or expressions you aren't ready for. If the excerpt is well-chosen the students won't mind. They are used to concentrating on "the good parts" of television programs and movies.

5. Give priority to culturally authentic material. There are uses for dubbed material, but I see them as a last resort. Non-anglophone North American television sometimes looks very much like its U.S. cousin, and the first time you see a Mexican family rushing off to buy a "Big Mac" or a family of *Quebecois* rhapsodizing over "Rice Krispies" it is great fun, but I think such material tends to reinforce an Americanocentric (sic) view of the world. However that may be, you can find a lot more to talk about in, say, a "Poulain" (=colt) chocolate commercial which shows us a Norman farm family leaving the breakfast table (and their Poulain hot chocolate) to hurry out to the barn and see their new colt.

SOME EXAMPLES (CHOSEN FROM FRENCH-LANGUAGE BROADCASTS)

1. Commercials. I have used with some success a Peugeot 30-second spot for a model called the "Z" (*La Zed*). The car drives a Z-shaped path down a snow-covered mountain road, then down a slope in the desert, then in traffic, and is parked. A voice sings "La Zed vous aide, vous aide. Elle se sent bien partout. Elle se faufile partout. Elle se gare n'importe où. La Zed vous aide, vous aide." (The Z helps you, helps you. It feels at home everywhere. It threads its way along everywhere. It parks anywhere. The Z helps you.) In each of the brief scenes there are crowds of people (skiers, Bedouins, Paris truck drivers and policemen), only some of whom are admiring the car. The scenery is varied as is the climate. The text is simple, all the verbs are in the present tense, and the vocabulary is idiomatic. For a quick review of object pronouns, however, it is eye-catching and ear-catching (after a few viewings the students were singing the ditty).

In this case, as with all such brief excerpts, I say little or nothing about what is coming. I tell the students to watch the first two or three times without worrying about how much they understand. I show the commercial once without interruption. I ask them, in the language, what is being sold (or advertised). That is usually, though not always, easy. During a second viewing I ask some simple questions about the visual content, e.g. pointing to the car, "What is this?" or "Where is the car now?" By use of the pause button I can "freeze" the image on the screen and ask questions involving vocabulary they already know (What is this?, What color is the house?, etc.). This use of the visual content can go on as long as you feel it is keeping their attention. Almost anything shot on location will yield a wealth of physical detail, objects, colors. With such a short item it will not over-tax the students' attention span to see the spot three or even four times before you begin to work on the audio portion. Although they are concentrating on the video, however, they are becoming accustomed to the sound track as well.

Next I repeat the audio portion by speaking it. (The difference between the spoken and the sung words has not created any special problems in my experience, but it does help students to hear the text from a live person in this first phase.) I have them repeat the words after me, leaving the opening image frozen on the screen. It may not be

necessary to do any translation. If they don't know the word for "help" (aider; La Zed vous aide.) you can mime it and do some simple substitution drills (I'm drowning, help me!, I help him/her., Who helps me?, Who helps you?, etc.). Even the less common verb "se faufiler" is not hard to teach by stopping the tape when the word occurs and tracing the movement of the car and by having students act out the movement among the desks.

At some point I usually stop the tape completely and work at the blackboard for a few minutes reviewing the order of object pronouns or the forms of the reflexive verbs. After a few minutes of blackboard work, and possibly some free discussion using the forms and lexicon of the video, I show the tape at least one last time just before the class ends. This usually sends at least a few of them out the class singing the commercial ditty. The hour goes very fast. The commercial itself lasts....30 seconds.

I want to stress at this point that it is absolutely crucial to *minimize time spent in passive viewing* by students. There should be no waiting. The equipment should be ready when you want it. Have the tape at the starting point of your selection so that all you have to do is turn on the machine when you are ready to begin. Once you have begun there should be no waiting while you look for a point on the tape: you can drive a car and talk, you can also rewind a tape and talk. You should never leave an image on the screen unless you are using it actively. Between showings the screen should be blank or the students' eyes will inevitably return to it, even if all there is to see is snow or glitches. (Such is the hypnotic power of the thing.) Don't be afraid to interrupt the video frequently after the second or third viewing of a short item and after the first viewing of a longer one. There should be a constant and rapid movement among three points: the TV monitor, the students, and you. With remote in hand you can move around the room with all the flamboyance of a Rassias if you choose to, and with a little practice your usual duet with the students can turn into a lively trio.

2. Excerpts from programs. These can be of any variety: news segments, documentaries, teleplays, quiz shows, etc. Interviews are generally too static to be used effectively. I try to avoid segments in which there is nothing but dialogue when the set is a studio sound stage. "Person-in-the-street" reports with several brief interviews work better than single-person interviews of political figures or celebrities. Whenever possible I look for material with information content as well as visual and linguistic impact. One of the most successful excerpts I have ever used in class was from a Canadian Broadcasting Company documentary about the making of the TV news: not only do students see backstage at the French television network (TF1) newsroom, they are also prompted to think about what constitutes news and how decisions are made about what news gets on the air.

In the case of a longer excerpt like this one, I prepare the students more than for commercial spot announcements, and I plan to use the video material as the basis of a complete unit of one week at least, with a test at the end. There is, naturally, more work to do preparing ancillary material like vocabulary lists, oral exercises and dictations, homework, and realia. If you can find video material which complements your textbook so much the better, but don't be afraid of using material which contains quite a bit of new vocabulary--when buttressed by the power of the image, vocabulary is more quickly assimilated than through simple in-class reading of a printed text with a comparable number of new words.

Before presenting my excerpt of "Derrière l'image", the CBC documentary just mentioned, I invite students to watch at least two of the national evening news programs for a few days in preparation (surprisingly few of them watch on their own). This allows me to bring the material from the video a bit closer to home, and to ask questions using the vocabulary learned (e.g. anchor man/person, logo, news, headlines, etc.). [NOTE: I should mention that the lesson materials for the use of "Derrière l'image" were developed in part by a group of secondary school and college teachers working together in the summer of 1982 in a seminar sponsored jointly by Illinois State University and Hall Township High School (Superintendent Walter Westrum).]

Before teaching this unit I prepare the following:

a. A primary vocabulary list of no more than 20 key words, *without translations*.
b. A secondary vocabulary list with another 15-20 words, also without translations.
c. Some True/False questions.
d. One or two dictations.
e. Some games to reinforce material learned from the tape.
f. Some take-home exercises, including at least a few questions based on ancillary materials to be given out in class (see below).
g. Ancillary materials (e.g. in this case, a page reproduced from a French television program listing).
h. One or more testing instruments.

Here is a sample week-long schedule based on an eight-minute excerpt from the CBC documentary.

Day 1:

a. Give the students a general idea of what they are about to see, in English if necessary. Remind them that this is material prepared for native speakers, stressing that you don't expect them to understand right away but that by the end of the week they will be able to watch the tape and understand virtually everything at normal speed.
b. Play the tape once without interruption and without distributing any printed material to the students.
c. Call for questions. There will be either none or too many. (While answering questions rewind the tape without looking at the screen. Most modern VCRs have an automatic stop feature that will allow you to go back to the beginning of the excerpt without peering at the counter. If your school has editing facilities, you might record the excerpt twice back-to-back so that you can show it a second time without rewinding.) Don't try to answer everything, and *don't* translate. After about four to five minutes play the excerpt again. If the class is fairly advanced, or particularly attentive, you may want to let the tape run through all the way again uninterrupted. Otherwise, stop it to call attention to the key vocabulary items where they occur. (A practical note: when you start the tape again after a pause the sound may not come on immediately. You may need to practice backing the tape up slightly before starting it again. This will also let the students hear the vocabulary item again immediately. A "quick-find" reverse or "reverse search" feature allows you to back up without losing the image. It also adds a moment of comic relief. Students may clamor to go over a vocabulary point again just so they can see this backward movement. I'm happy to give them this little laugh along with the repetition.)
d. Distribute the primary vocabulary list and go over each word briefly in whatever way you usually introduce new vocabulary. Assign vocabulary exercises due the next day.

Day 2:

a. Do the vocabulary exercises in class, with questions or substitution drills based on the vocabulary interspersed.
b. Show the tape again, stopping it at the vocabulary items which gave the students the most difficulty. At this point you can stop the tape to call attention to other details. On the CBC documentary we see the reporters gathered in the TV news room to plan the evening newscast. The camera shows people scratching their heads, chewing their nails, gesturing and grimacing. This is an opportunity to go over parts of the body and body language with first or second year students. Again the pause button can be used to good effect to capture an expression or gesture which the students can be called upon to mimic. (A game of "Simon says" would fit in here.)

c. Just before the end of the class period distribute ancillary materials and further exercises, at least some of which should be based on printed documents in the foreign language. In the case of the CBC excerpt we simply copied two pages from a popular French television weekly guide. One of the exercises calls for the student to answer questions by consulting the guide, e.g. How many channels are there in France?, What are their abbreviations?, What time does programming begin?, End?, When is the news on?, What is on channel three (FR3) Thursday at 8:30 p.m.?, and so on. While looking for the answers to these questions the students will make discoveries of their own about things like which American programs are shown or what titles are given to American films.

Day 3:

a. Go over the exercises in class.
b. Discuss the ancillary materials. Give them a chance to tell about their discoveries. In the case of the TV guide I ask them about the nature of programming in general. If they aren't sure we go through the listing together. You can say a great deal about the role of television in French culture by this simple exercise--the lack of situation comedies, the rather negligible presence of quiz shows, or of sports events, the high number of "serious" programs, debates, etc., etc.
c. It is possible to skip the tape entirely this day, or to show it only once, with additional attention given to content (in this instance the question of what gets on the news and what doesn't).
d. Announce that there will be a test on the tape the next day following one (or two) additional viewings.

Day 4:

a. Show the tape once allowing for a few questions over difficult points.
b. Show the tape a second time without questions if time permits.
c. Administer the test. (I like relatively short tests of no more than 30 minutes, but the test can be longer if you limit yourself to one showing of the tape.).

Day 5:

a. Return and discuss the test.
b. Review the tape as needed. By now students should be able to understand everything in the excerpt. Point that out. If there is time you may want to show them something else from the same tape, making sure that the level of difficulty is not too great.

OUT-OF-CLASS USE

If you have a language lab or learning resource center where students can watch video tapes you can add an extra dimension to the use of off-air materials. Aside from the obvious--allowing students to watch the tapes on their own--it is possible to adapt the tapes for individual or, better yet, small group tutorials in two ways, both of which involve additional hardware. The most expensive and, for the time being, least accessible method is to link the tape to a microcomputer. The computer can be programmed to advance and stop the tape and provide instruction based on the tape. This is a big topic and cannot be treated here. The most promising use of *interactive* video involves video discs, but it will be a while before these are easily available.

The second way to adapt off-air tapes for the lab is through the use of a device called a character generator. This is a machine which is used to put subtitles on a video tape. It can be used to good advantage to put vocabulary items, questions, and even exercises right on the excerpt you have chosen. If you have editing/copying equipment you can make more than one copy of the same excerpt, one with no study aids, another with vocabulary items only, a

third with questions and exercises, etc. It would be possible in this way to make the same excerpt serve for different levels by varying the difficulty of the material placed on the tape by the character generator. This is a good way to get more from the tapes, but it is by no means essential.

CONCLUSION

Off-air video is not a new method making messianic claims and in search of adepts. It is a resource that can be integrated into virtually any approach to second language acquisition. I have no doubt that my approach, sketched out above, is anything but primitive. Once the most successful teachers decide to call on this resource there will be more sophisticated techniques developed and disseminated. So long as this resource is not transformed into pre-packaged units--a somewhat self-defeating use of the material--its use will involve greater time and effort than the preparation of class materials drawn from textbooks. If secondary and post-secondary teachers will collaborate in the preparation of tapes, however, they will not find the work onerous, they will see their own proficiency improve, and they will share their knowledge even as they are preparing classroom materials. The time spent, in other words, will be well spent.

SOME FURTHER READING

Although two of these articles specify university-level teaching secondary-school teachers will find them interesting.

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